**Darvills Hill Farm**

Field of Dreams’ and fledglings at Darvills Hill Farm

By Charlotte Downing

I went to Groundswell recently, a regenerative agriculture festival in Hitchin. Yes, these things do exist, with DJ Andy Cato of Groove Armada / Wild Farmed Wheat fame headlining at the Earthworm Arms on Wednesday night. What's not to love? It is a rapidly growing event from a handful of farmers chewing the fat around a campfire nine years ago, to a two-day extravaganza attended by over 6000 people with an interest in food production and the environment, with the regeneration of soil at the heart of it all.

One of the great questions posed while I was listening to the impeccable Annie Landlass of Soil Mentor talk about indicators for good soil health, specifically high numbers of earthworms was ‘How do they get there in the first place?’ I suggested to my nearest neighbour, that maybe it was like the Kevin Costner film Field of Dreams and the immortal line ‘If you build it, he will come’ Unsurprisingly, they looked at me blankly and edged away. I think Kevin was onto something though, if you create the right conditions and have some patience, after a while things do just seem to show up.

Four years on from when we first started to mindfully graze our sheep, plant trees and regenerate hedges it feels like we are starting to have our own small groundswell. We are finding more earthworms when we're doing our soil sampling, the taller, wilder plant life in the meadows and hedges has created space for more small mammals such as voles to inhabit, which have in turn created the opportunity for some apex predators to move in. We were ridiculously excited when an inspection of our barn owl boxes by Bucks Owl and Raptor Group (BORG) this summer found three Barn owlets getting ready to fledge.

For better or worse, human beings, like earthworms and owls, are a keystone species, that is we have a disproportionate effect on the natural environment relative to our abundance. One of the great things we've discovered though is that you don't have to use lots of inputs or energy to have a positive effect, you do need to pay attention though and have fun dancing to some of Groove Armada’s classics in the process.

Ps We have arranged with the fabulous team at Oxmoor Farm, Great Hampden to put on a community screening of the film ‘Six inches of soil’ on Friday 13th September 2024. Tickets are free. Small plates of locally sourced food by chef Paddy Maynard of Oxmoor Farm, and drinks will be available to buy (and eat!) from 4pm.

The film (which runs for 96 mins) will start at 7pm, followed by a half hour question-and-answer session with a panel of fantastic Chiltern farmers and producers who themselves are working hard to provide an alternative to the UK’s industrial food system.

Tickets on sale via the Oxmoor Farm's website www.oxmoorfarm.co.uk/the-barn/

See you there!